Known Knowns, Known Unknowns, and Unknown Unknowns: A New Basis for Healthy Interfaith Relationships
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Donald Rumsfeld, besides being George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, was a classical epistemolgoist. Rumsfeld had a deep, intuitive epistemological sensitivity. I'm not sure he knew it and if he did he probably would not have used the term "epistemological." Epistemology is one of those wonderfully esoteric words we learn in seminary and never use in public again – words like hermeneutic, heilsgeschichte, weltanshaung. We all probably dropped them into a sermon or two in our first years to show off and establish our credentials as authentic scholars. Epistemology – I finally get to use it openly, brazenly even, and my inspiration is none other than Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

On February 2, 2002, five months after 9/11, when it was becoming embarrassingly clear that there might not be clear evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld held a Pentagon Press Briefing. When asked by a reporter about the lack of evidence, Rumsfeld said:

"There are known knowns: these are the things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns: the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks through the history of our country…it is the latter category that are the difficult ones."

The press had great fun with it. There were both positive and negative reactions to Rumsfeld's speech. The Plain English Campaign gave Rumsfeld its "Foot in Mouth Award." Others acknowledged that he was on to something. An Australian Economist, John Quiggin, said: "although the language may be tortured, the basic point is both valid and important."

Slate called Rumsfeld a poet. Perhaps with tongue in cheek, Slate said: "Donald Rumsfeld's poetry is paradoxical: it uses playful language to address the most somber subjects: war, terrorism, mortality. His work, with its dedication to the fractured rhythms of the plainspoken vernacular, is reminiscent of William Carlos Williams."

Slate compiled a collection of Rumsfeld's poetry and Saturday Night Live I believe did a skit and song about the known known paradigm.

In any event, I propose it as a launch point for some thoughts on Interfaith Relations.

It is a matter of great urgency, for many reasons: the diversity of our culture, religious violence, the rise of radical Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Hans Kung famously said: “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. And there will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.” [Christianity: Essence, History, Future, and in several speeches]

God knows there is enough conflict. Anna Case Winters, Professor of Theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, tells about a conversation with an official from the World Bank. The woman was responsible for organizing a World Bank dialogue on ethics and values and wanted to invite religious leaders to participate. She was overruled. She was told by top World Bank executives that religious leaders would not be helpful. Religion, she was told, is defunct and “when it still has influence it is divisive and even dangerous.” Unfortunately, Professor Winters concludes “Unfortunately, these charges are not without foundation…Jonathan’s Swift’s acid observation is to the point: ‘We have just enough religion to make us hate one another – but not enough to make us love one another.’” [God Alone is God]

The ghastly episode last January in Paris is a tragic case in point – a small cell of Islamic extremists murdered most of the editorial staff of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo – a journal about the same size as the Christian Century, then murdered a police officer who had been wounded as he was lying on the sidewalk pathetically holding his arm up for protection as the gunman shot him. Before it was over a maintenance worker and four Jewish shoppers were killed at a Jewish grocery store.

It was repugnant and appalling – particularly as the terrorist shouted “God is great” and other Islamic slogans. Americans responded in two ways: First, the predictable anti-Muslim rhetoric escalated, Franklin Graham leading the way. There were bomb threats at mosques in Chicago and elsewhere. I was in Dallas at the time and turned on the news and saw coverage of a major Islamic conference. As hundreds of Muslims arrived at the conference center they were greeted by a crowd of angry protestors carrying American flags and huge signs saying, “This is a Christian nation. You are not welcome here,” and “God back where you came from and take Obama with you.”

Apparently, creating anti-Islam sentiments, anger, blame – hopefully violence – is precisely what the extremists want – to support their basic, formative conviction that is is “us vs. them.”

Islam vs. the rest of the world…The more anger, hatred and violence the better. There can be no compromise, accommodation – certainly no reconciliation.

The other American response was to join them – the international mantra: “Je suis Charlie” – “I am Charlie.” Understandable, but, as David Brooks and others reminded us at the time, Charlie Hebdo is the quintessential French secular cultural expression of cynicism and disdain, not only for political and religious pretension but all religion. Tolerance is not a value there as it is in our liberal culture.

Now, in no way does this mean that the murders were justified – that the editors brought it on themselves. Nothing justifies what happened.

But, perhaps there is another more meaningful response, a better mantra: “Je suis Ahmed,” “I am Ahmed” – Ahmed Merabet was the Paris policeman who was brutally murdered as he lay, wounded on the sidewalk, after trying to defend Charlie Hebdo. Ahmed was a Muslim – Cherlie Hebdo ridiculed his religion and his culture – and he died defending their right to do so. So – “Je suis Ahmed.”

New York Times journalist Maureen Dowd wrote. “Forgive me, but something is badly awry. I was taught that religion should invoke sympathy, patience, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, a love of peace. Instead the name of God is used to justify vices that are the opposite of these virtues.”

That was before the emergence of ISIS, with its brutal videotaped executions, suicide bombings, Al Shabab massacring Christians, Boko Haram kidnapping and enslaving school girls.

And yet, no one is innocent. Philip Jenkins, professor at Penn State and Baylor, in a Christian Century column “Notes From the Global Church: Forgotten Genocides,” remembers the July 1995 incident in which Serbian forces killed some 8,000 Muslims in and around the Bosnian town of Srebrencia, an atrocity – seen by Muslims as an act of genocide perpetrated by Christians. Jenkins notes that it is by no mean the only such instance of interreligious violence and ethnic cleansing in modern times. There is another side of the story, one scarcely known in the West – the repeated massacre of Muslims by Christians, in events that shaped the modern religious geography.

Jenkins notes that the notion of Christian Europe and Muslim Middle East would have astonished observers as late as 1900. From the 16th through the 20th centuries, much of the area was religiously diverse. “Instead of today’s fairly homogenous Middle East – we would do better to think of a religiously complex region from the Danube to the Euphrates, from Belgrade to Baghdad. Our modern map is a product of decades of violence and ethnic cleansing during which Christians were driven out of the Middle East and Muslims out of Europe.”

As the Ottoman Empire crumbled and the frontier retreated, Muslims were targeted for persecution and ethnic cleansing. Several million people were driven out or killed in pogroms. During the Greek Revolution in 1921 Christian bishops and priests urged their flocks to annihilate their ancient enemies.

When the Russians expanded their empire the same thing happened. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims were driven out or killed, and during the Balkan War, 1912-13, religious massacres of Muslims by Christians was commonplace.

Jenkins concludes his dismal essay: "Religious violence was cumulative in nature. When Christians drove Muslims into exile in Turkey, those exiles naturally sought revenge on any local Christians they found. Those Christians in turn persecuted Muslims and the spiral of hatred continued indefinitely…The fact of victimhood does not for a second excuse any of the evils perpetrated by the Ottomans or any other group – looking at the broader historical picture, neither Christians nor Muslims can claim to be entirely blameless. The Serbian massacre of Bosnian Muslims was not unique." ["The Christian Century," 12/24/14]

Global religious diversity is not new. What is new and unprecedented, in the United States, is how incredibly diverse we have become recently here, at home, in the United States, and continue to become. Harvard's Diane Eck begins her fine book, A New Religious America, with a stunning series of observations – which we have all witnessed:

"The huge white dome of a mosque, with minarets, rises from cornfields outside Toledo, Ohio. A great Hindu Temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville. A Cambodian Buddhist Temple and monastery is set in the farmlands southeast of Minneapolis." Time was not long ago when sociologist Will Herberg's groundbreaking study, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, was an accurate descriptor of religion in American culture. No longer: not even close.

Diane Eck observes: "There are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians, more Muslims (by far) than members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and as many Muslim Americans as Jews. Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist City in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of natural born American Buddhists." [pp. 1-3]

What is new is that the old Catholic, Protestant, Jew paradigm no longer describes us. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs – are all neighbors, our classmates, fellow workers. Establishing understanding, extending

respect, not just accepting but affirming one another in our diversity has never been more urgent.

Cynthia Campbell, former President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, has written a very helpful book, A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity. From her particular Christian perspective she asks: "How does one affirm faith in Jesus Christ and seek to live according to the teachings of Christian faith and at the same time interact with and relate to neighbors who are not Christian?" Her book reads just as relevantly changing the names to Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu; i.e. A Jewish Approach to Religious Diversity, a Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu approach.

She begins by pointing out an embarrassing reality that many of the most prominent Christian voices are not helpful by announcing that Christianity is the only "true" religion and all others are false and those who follow them do not experience true life with God now or in the life to come.

One thinks of Bailey Smith the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention who announced confidently that God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew: God only hears prayers prayed in the name of Jesus.

And it's not just evangelical Protestant Christians who claim exclusive access to God's truth. In 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican, headed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued a Declaration "Dominus Jesus: on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," which rearticulated the view that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church and Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior of the world. Thankfully, the Catholic Church has since moved away from that harsh and absolute position.

Campbell helpfully explores and critiques the alternative position and cites the biblical texts used to justify them.

1. Exclusivism

This is the traditional Christian view. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me." That is that. There is one way, period.

Everyone wants to have the one and only true way. The late Peter Gomes used to tell a story about a man who was about to be granted entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. As his orientation, St. Peter conducted a tour of the facilities. He showed the man a long, elegant hallway with a number of elaborate doorways opening into huge rooms full of people. From the first room he heard beautiful Gregorian chant. "Those are the Roman Catholics," St. Peter explained. From the next room he heard rigorous,

urgent praying. “That’s the Baptist room.” He heard arguing, obviously a disagreeable debate emanating from the next room – “The Presbyterians” – and beautiful, energetic singing from the Methodist room. St. Peter indicated the next room and said – “Now we must be very quiet. Those are the Episcopalians. They think they’re the only ones here.” “That’s an ecumenical joke,” Gomes used to say. “You can substitute any denomination, any religion, and the story still holds.”

Campbell’s critique of Exclusivism is that it ignores the many biblical texts that suggest a less exclusive, more inclusive God. In addition, she observes that when Christians achieve hegemony, and power and authority, the results are not very pretty: The Crusades, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Pogroms, Holocaust.

She asks pointedly and poignantly:

“Why would a God in whose image all people are created devise a plan of salvation that would automatically exclude most of the human beings who ever lived?"

Now, I know you cannot construct a theology on human reason and common sense – and yet, it always troubled me that exclusivism is so contradictory to common sense. A dear friend who grew up Pentecostal and was told that everyone who didn’t have the gift of the spirit was going to hell told me once, “I never did believe that stuff.”

The second position is:

2. Inclusivism

Inclusivism is suggested by the many Psalms, for instance, that know and speak of God as the Lord of the whole creation, Pauline references to the redemption of the creation and the assurance that all will become one and be reconciled. And Jesus himself – the one who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” also said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this flock.” [John 10:16]

Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock represents the Inclusivist position:

“The particularity of the claim that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone must always be held in tension with another equally important thing Christians know about God, namely, the universality of God’s love for the creation and for all persons.” [cited by Campbell, p. 14]

The third option Campbell offers, in addition to Exclusivism and Inclusivism, is

3. **Pluralism**. Pluralism is often used synonymously with Diversity. It is not the same as diversity. Diversity describes the wide variety of human

religions…a simple, observable reality. Pluralism is a particular approach to diversity.

Pluralism maintains that “the religions of the world’s people have their own integrity and that every attempt should be made to understand and respect those various religions on their own terms.” [p. 17]

Pluralism does not suggest that we gloss over differences between religions – which is ultimately disrespectful. [Goethe – “merely to tolerate is to insult.”] Rather, Pluralism, according to John Hicks, a theologian with which it is identified (and, parenthetically, whose theology got him in a lot of trouble with his Presbytery – but was finally exonerated). John Hicks proposes that “various religions are specific ways of pointing to a larger reality that stands behind them.” [Campbell] Different doctrines are human attempts to respond to ultimate reality.

Exclusivists, obviously, do not agree and take great issue here, and in fact none of these three positions is entirely adequate. According to Campbell, Exclusivism simply fails to account for the wideness of God’s mercy and grace, Inclusivism often sounds like a more polite form of Exclusivism, and Pluralism can simply gloss over and minimize substantial differences.

Let me call on two more authorities. Ted Hiebert, Dean of the Faculty at McCormick (and this is not an extended commercial for McCormick, although I did teach there and served as Chair of the Board) argues, persuasively, I think – based on both the Noah story in Hebrew scripture and the Tower of Babel – that diversity is obviously God’s idea – that diverse cultural and religious ideas reflect God’s intention for the world which must be embraced. [Toppling the Tower: Essays on Babel and Diversity, MTS, 2000, cited by Campbell, p. 28]

Rabbi and distinguished scholar Irving Greenberg, in a collection of essays, For the Sake of Heaven and Earth, argues that God’s covenant with Noah sets forth the relationship between God and creation in terms of unconditional love and the preservation of life. Greenberg says religion that is in the business of protecting life, repairing the world – Tikkun Olam – is a valid expression of God’s covenant with humanity.

So, bottom line – does it matter what religion you embrace? Is everyone going to get there in the end? I have a confession to make. I do not know. I am more than happy to turn that complex matter over to God and to invest my energy in following and living for the one who for me is the way, the truth and the life. But knowing ultimate matters is above my pay grade, and, I respectfully submit, anybody else’s. And I want to propose that saying “I don’t know” is a legitimate and faithful religious affirmation.

There are those known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, Donald Rumsfeld said. He was not only being a poet, but a pretty good theologian at that.

In an essay she wrote for the Christian Century, Episcopal priest and now college professor, author and popular lecturer, Barbara Brown Taylor introduced me to a thinker I had not heard of before.

He was a theologian who lived five centuries ago. His name is Nicholas of Cusa and his contribution to theology was the notion he called "Learned Ignorance." He wrote, "God is the unknown infinite who dwells in light inaccessible" and so God's greatest gift to us is "to know that we do not know. Nothing more perfect comes to a person," Nicholas said.

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes:

"In Nicholas' scheme, the dumbest people in the world are those who think they know. Their certainty about what is true not only pits them against each other, it prevents them from learning anything new. That is truly dangerous knowledge. They do not know that they do not know and their unlearned ignorance keeps them in the dark about most of the things that matter." Taylor says, "To know that you do not know is the beginning of wisdom." ["The Christian Century," June 6, 2001]

I have a fantasy, a dream. Wouldn't it be something if religious leaders everywhere joined hands in a liturgical confession of "learned ignorance," a humble act of what my mentor and teacher Joseph Sittler called theological modesty before the infinite mystery that is God; if the Pope and Dalai Lama, Chief Rabbis and Chief Imams, Patriarchs, seminary presidents, televangelists, Bishops, District Superintendents and Stated Clerks, joined hands and promised, if not to reexamine, at least soften their truth claims that divide and sometimes turn violent. Wouldn't it be something if Christians promised to stop using their truth as a weapon, to eliminate the other either by cleansing or converting? Wouldn't it be something if religious leaders stopped saying "Thus saith the Lord" and instead learned how to preface pronouncements with "It is our opinion that"; if everyone learned to say instead of "We know," "We believe."

Deep in the Jewish tradition, into which we are grafted in Christ, is an intentional modesty before the mystery of God, a clear confession that in fact, we know what we do not know. You can find it one of the best of our ancient stories. It's in the second book of Hebrew scripture, the Book of Exodus. Moses has led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the wilderness of Sinai. God summons Moses to the mountain. Moses naturally expects to see God, but a thick cloud descends and Moses can't see at all. God gives Moses the Law, the Ten Commandments. But when he comes down from the mountain with the two tablets of the law he discovers the people worshipping a golden calf. In a fit of rage Moses

destroys the tablets, scolds the people – to put it mildly. Back up on the mountain, he'd like a little assurance that he's on the right track, that this grand venture is not a product of his own ego, or overactive imagination. A little concrete evidence please, that I'm not making this up, that you are there – you are not, as one of your own people said one time, simply a product of my own fears and insecurities and need for a father. Can't I see you with my own eyes, just for a moment? Is it too much to ask?

A voice from the cloud says, "I will make my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face." And then God says the most amazing thing: "There is a place by me where you can stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but my face you shall not see," i.e. you cannot have the certainty you seek. You can't see the entirety of my reality, my back, not my face, a tantalizing hint of the whole reality.

Apparently what God has in mind, according to this ancient, shared tradition, is not certainty but faith, life lived not on the basis of a list of absolutely true maxims and rules that keep getting us into trouble and starting fights among us about whose truth is the real truth, but a life of faithful trusting, a life of prayerful inquiry, a life long quest for truth that will never be complete until that day when we no longer see dimly, as St Paul put it, but face to face.

The great theologian Paul Tillich said that the drive for truth is deep within us, the life-long search for truth to hold on to, and live by and die for, if necessary. But then Tillich issued a warning:

"In the depth of every serious doubt and every despair of truth, the passion for truth is still at work. Do not give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth." [The New Being: What is Truth?, p. 67]

I am a Christian – Christianity is my home, spiritually, culturally. For Christians, Jesus is the Truth. Not words written about him, not theologies, creeds, confessions, not institutions and ecclesiastical structures and hierarchies. All of it is secondary to and transcended by the truth that he is. And if we hold to him, if we listen to him because he is our truth, we will not use our religion to exclude others because he did not. Because he is our truth we will not use our religion to judge others because he did not and specifically told us not to. Because is our truth we will do everything we can to forgive and accept and extend compassion to our neighbor because he did and told us to. Because he is the truth, we can never claim that we have the only truth because he told us specifically that he has other sheep that

are not in our fold. We follow him, as someone said, “by faith and not by sight.”

The artists and poets know that there is truth that we know more deeply than with our minds, our intellects, our reason. It is truth of the heart, what poet Wendell Berry calls “knowing by cherishing, knowing by heart.” The best part of life, after all, is like that. You can’t understand love with your mind alone. You cannot reduce your love for your spouse, your partner, your children, you parents, to a formula. I’d be hard pressed to mount a rational argument to prove the dearest, most precious, most cherished parts of my life. But I’m willing to bet my life on them.

You know love by remembering and cherishing and, as the poet observed, by the singing in your heart.

Before he died, William Sloan Coffin wrote a little book, Credo, in which he reminded us that “credo,” the Latin word from which we get “creed,” actually comes from the Latin word for heart, “corda.” So when we say, I believe…we are not saying that know with our minds the absolute, unarguable, eternal truth of whatever follows – but that we know this in our hearts. To say I believe, is not to say I know – not at all. It is to say, I turn my heart to this, I set my heart – I give my heart, my life, my all.

There are known knowns, and known unknowns, and there are unknown unknowns.

Thanks be to God.